

THE PRAYER OF A MURDERER

Psalm 51

This Psalm is perhaps the brightest gem in the whole book. It contains instructions so large and doctrines so precious that even the tongues of angels could not do justice to the full development of it.

It is a Psalm of David. In it he reveals that he is a very unhappy man. It is the plaintive wail of a bleeding heart and a broken spirit. The fountains of the deep have been broken up in the soul of the writer. It was written when he was perhaps about fifty years old and after his awful fall into sin. He had plunged into horrible sins. He had committed a double crime. He had wrecked the home of a faithful and loyal soldier, and then he had taken his life also.

Approximately a year after David had sinned so grievously in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah he was visited by Nathan the prophet. In His mercy God sent him this preacher, who was as skilful as he was brave. He told David a very stirring story of the injustice of one man to another. He told him about a man with great flocks who stole the only lamb of a poor man. The story so enraged David that he bit his lips, clenched his fists, and said, "The man who did that thing shall surely die."

David was a splendid illustration of the fact that it is so much easier to go into a rage about the sins of somebody else than it is to be indignant on account of our own. David listened to Nathan's sermon, but never took a word of it to himself. He reasoned, "This man Nathan is certainly digging up that scoundrel that has been sheep stealing, whoever he is." Just then Nathan did a tremendously courageous thing. He pointed his finger into the face of this lust-smearred and blood-stained king and said, "Thou art the man."

Then what happened? David's cheeks turned pale, his knees got weak, so he fell on his face and sobbed out his prayer to God. This prayer was altogether becoming of one who had sinned so grievously. It revealed a genuine sense of the destructive power of sin, a brokenness and contrition of soul, and an utter repudiation of self. He abhorred himself and the sin which had brought him into such a bondage.

There is a vast difference between prayers arising from the influence of habit and those which grow out of a deep sense of guilt, need and dependence. When David uttered this remarkable prayer, he realized that he needed the grace and mercy of his Maker. Consequently, his requests were simple, pointed, earnest and persevering. How personal were his cries! How intense was his pleading! He did not try to excuse his sin. He did not plead any mitigating circumstances. He did not try to lay the blame on the shoulders of anybody else. He recognized that his sin was an act of rebellion against God.

I. The Prayer For Pardon. Psalm 51:1-4.

David's plea for pardon found its basis in the following:

1. His consciousness of sin.
He said, "I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me."
2. His confession of sin.
He prayed, "According unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."
In this confession David:
 - (1) Recognized the evil of sin.
He regarded sin as:
 - a. An unrighteous thing.
 - b. A guilty violation of a holy law.
 - c. A defiling thing.

(2) Recognized the sin as his own.

He made an honest confession of his own transgressions. It is easy to see and to acknowledge the faults of others, but it is difficult to confess one's own sins, especially those as serious as the word "transgression" indicates. A transgression is a deliberate, stubborn turning away from God when there is a knowledge of the right. It is a breaking loose, or a tearing away from God, in a spirit of rebellion, a deliberate and wilful violation.

It is sometimes hard to believe that the sins we commit are our own. We are prone to try to shift the responsibility for them to others. We are willing to place the blame anywhere except on ourselves. We blame the tendencies which we have inherited, the training which we have received, the circumstances in which we have been placed, or the temptations by which we were assailed. But of such we find nothing in this Psalm. David admitted that the sin was his own. Consequently the guilt of the crime was his alone.

(3) Regarded his sin as hostile to God.

He realized that what he had done was evil in the eyes of God. He had sinned grievously against society, but it was the fact that his sins were offences against God that chiefly impressed and distressed him. All sins against one's fellowman are offensive to God. You cannot harm your fellowman without wronging God. David realized that his sin had wronged God more than it had injured man.

3. His confidence that God would forgive his sin.

Out of the depths of his sin and degradation David cried, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness." Real and abiding mercy could come only from God. His earnest appeal, "be gracious unto me," expressed a deep and urgent desire. His appeal was based only and entirely upon the mercy and grace of a holy God. Nothing but the mercy of God could meet his need. He dared not ask for justice. Only a self-righteous person would be presumptuous enough to think of doing that. Wisdom would prompt any person to ask God for mercy and forgiveness.

Loathing sin and grieving for having committed it, David prayed, "According unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." He regarded his sin as a blotted record to be expunged. "Blot out" means to wipe off, to remove, or to efface. David wanted more than a cancellation of his record; he wanted it expunged or wiped off completely. He asked God to blot out his transgressions and his iniquities. Wouldn't you like for people to forget and erase from memory every mean thing you ever said or did? That is just what God does when He forgives you. Your sins are forgiven, blotted out, and no longer held against you.

Not only does this Psalm regard sin as a blotted record to be expunged, but also as a polluted robe to be washed. David prayed, "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." This word "thoroughly" suggests the need of a vigorous through and through process of washing to remove the deeply embedded and unclean substance. It is like the act of washing a garment by means of kneading. His iniquities were so great and so deeply ingrained that nothing less than a vigorous, penetrating cleansing would be satisfactory. The phrase "from mine iniquity" is another indication of his personal consciousness of sin. He said, "My sin is ever before me." "Before" means in front of and the word "ever" means continually. The psalmist was saying that his transgressions and sins stood out in front of him all of the time. God would not let him forget them and live without their haunting presence.

II. The Prayer For Purity. Psalm 51:5-11.

1. David prayed that God would purge him.

"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." He was thoroughly convinced that an inherent depravity of nature was the evil root from which all sin sprang. So, he confessed his sinful nature, as well as his sinful deeds by saying, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." That is why he prayed, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean."

2. David prayed that God would purify him.

He wanted his sin-polluted and sin-stained nature cleansed. He prayed, "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow....Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." David had an intense desire to be purified. However, he realized that cleansing had to come from other hands than his own. This prayer is a confession of his inability to cleanse himself. But, he believed that the cleansing would be complete. He wanted to be entirely cleansed and purified.

He wanted his cleansing from sin to be so thorough that there would not be any visible marks of its occupation of his heart. He wanted to be as white as snow. That is what the cleansing process of the cross does. It does such a thorough work that nothing is left undone. The blood of Christ cleanses a person all over and does it for all time.

"Create for me." This is an appeal for a divine work of grace at the center of one's life. The word "heart" is used to represent the centrality of one's whole being: mind, emotions and will. It is the wellspring from which flow thoughts, motives and the will to do. "Clean" means unalloyed, or that which is acceptable to God. David greatly desired a clean heart. He wanted all the dirt swept out of it.

3. David prayed that God would protect him.

"Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me." This is an earnest entreaty for preservation from sin. "Cast me not away" from Thy protecting presence into danger, loving presence into wrath, joyous presence into distress, gracious presence into despair.

A clean heart is an inward work of grace. It does for what God does in a person. "Clean" means having a heart in which there is not any known unforgiven and uncleansed sin. However, unknown sin is fully known to God. A clean heart is the consciousness that there is nothing between God and the soul.

Note David's prayer for rightness of spirit also. Clean hearts and right spirits are twin necessities. The absence of a right spirit is the dead fly in the ointment of many a renewed life. It is possible to seek a clean heart, and yet possess and maintain a wrong spirit in the daily life. Clean hearts are powerless to attract souls to Christ if they are not wedded to right spirits, the proper medium of expression.